



## **INFORMATIONAL MEMORANDUM**

**TO: Transportation & Infrastructure Committee**  
**FROM: Laurel Humphrey, Council Analyst**  
**DATE: April 3, 2020**  
**SUBJECT: Transportation for America: The Congestion Con**

### **ISSUE**

At the 2020 National League of Cities Congressional City Conference, Councilmember Kruller attended a presentation on “The Congestion Con,” published by Transportation for America, and requested to add it to the next committee agenda. The Committee agreed to do so.

The report summary from the Transportation for America website:

*In an expensive effort to curb congestion in urban regions, we have overwhelmingly prioritized one strategy: we have spent decades and hundreds of billions of dollars widening and building new highways. We added 30,511 new freeway lane-miles of road in the largest 100 urbanized areas between 1993 and 2017, an increase of 42 percent. That rate of freeway expansion significantly outstripped the 32 percent growth in population in those regions over the same time period. Yet this strategy has utterly failed to “solve” the problem at hand—delay is up in those urbanized areas by a staggering 144 percent.*

*Those new lane-miles haven’t come cheap and we are spending billions to widen roads and seeing unimpressive, unpredictable results in return. Further, the urbanized areas expanding their freeways more rapidly aren’t necessarily having more success curbing congestion—in fact, in many cases the opposite is true.*

*This report examines why our strategies to reduce congestion are failing, why eliminating congestion might actually be the wrong goal, and how spending billions to expand highways can actually make congestion worse by encouraging people to drive more than they otherwise would, a counterintuitive but well-documented phenomenon known as induced demand. The report also has five simple policy recommendations to make better use of our billions of dollars without pouring yet more into a black hole of congestion “mitigation.”*

<http://t4america.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Congestion-Report-2020-FINAL.pdf>

### **RECOMMENDATION**

Discussion only.

### **Attachment**

The Congestion Con Report



THE  
**CONGESTION**

**CON**

How more lanes and more money equals more traffic



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**In an expensive effort to curb congestion in urban regions, we have overwhelmingly prioritized one strategy: we have spent decades and hundreds of billions of dollars widening and building new highways.** We added 30,511 new freeway lane-miles in the largest 100 urbanized areas between 1993 and 2017, an increase of 42 percent. That rate of expansion significantly outstripped the 32 percent growth in population in those regions over the same time period.

**Yet this strategy has utterly failed to “solve” congestion.**

Those new lane-miles haven't come cheap. We know that states alone spent **more than \$500 billion on highway capital investments** in urbanized areas between 1993-2017, with a sizable portion going toward highway expansion. And the initial construction costs are just the tip of the iceberg. For roads that are already in good condition, it still costs approximately \$24,000 per year on average to maintain each lane-mile in a state of good repair, creating significant financial liabilities now and for years into the future.

**We are spending billions to widen roads and seeing unimpressive, unpredictable results in return.** In those 100 urbanized areas, congestion has grown by a staggering 144 percent, far outpacing population growth. (For this report, congestion is measured as annual hours of delay using data from the Texas Transportation Institute's Urban Mobility Report). Further, the urbanized areas expanding their roads more rapidly aren't necessarily having more success curbing congestion—in fact, in many cases the opposite is true.

## Why aren't we reducing congestion?

First, the average person drives significantly more each year in these 100 urbanized areas. Vehicle-miles traveled (VMT) per person increased by 20 percent between 1993-2017. This increase in driving is partially due to how we have allowed these urbanized areas to grow: letting development sprawl, creating greater distances between housing and other destinations, and forcing people to take longer and longer trips on a handful of regional highways to fulfill daily needs. We should be addressing those sources of congestion, but instead, we accept more driving and more traffic as unavoidable outcomes that we must address through costly highway expansion. This is a significantly more expensive and less effective approach than reducing the need to drive or length of trips. And unfortunately, spending billions to expand highways can actually make congestion worse by encouraging people to drive more than they otherwise would, a counterintuitive but well-documented phenomenon known as **induced demand**.

**We are spending billions to widen roads and seeing unimpressive, unpredictable results in return.**

**Eliminating congestion is also simply the wrong goal.** While severe congestion can have real negative impacts, congestion is also generally a symptom of a successful, vibrant economy—a sign of a place people want to be. **Instead, we should be focused on providing and improving access.**

What does that mean? The core purpose of transportation infrastructure is to provide access to work, education, healthcare, groceries, recreation, and all other daily needs. Congestion can become a problem when it seriously obstructs access, but may not be a major problem if it doesn't. Car speeds don't necessarily tell us anything about whether or not the transportation network is succeeding at connecting as many people as possible to the things they need, as efficiently as possible. Yet a narrow emphasis on vehicle speed and delay underlies all of the regulations, procedures, and cultural norms behind transportation decisions, from the standards engineers use to design roads to the criteria states use to prioritize projects for funding. This leads us to widen freeways reflexively, almost on autopilot, perpetuating the cycle that produces yet more traffic.

## What needs to happen: Five policy recommendations

We need to face the music: we are doubling and tripling down on a failed strategy. We cannot keep relying on the same expensive and ineffective approach. With discussions underway about the next federal transportation legislation—a process that only happens every five years—now is the critical time to make changes before we pour billions more into a solution that doesn't work. This report recommends five key policy changes, many of which could be incorporated into the upcoming transportation reauthorization:

**1) Reorient our national program around access—connect people to jobs and services.** The only viable way to reduce traffic is to tackle the issue at the source: bring jobs, housing, and other destinations closer together to shorten and reduce the number and length of car trips people need to take. We need to reorient our national transportation program around advancing that goal instead of focusing narrowly on vehicle speed and delay.

**2) Require that transportation agencies stop favoring new roads over maintenance.** Existing federal law gives states substantial flexibility in how they spend highway dollars. As a result, states continue to spend a significant portion of funding to build new roads at the expense of repair needs. These highway expansions ultimately induce yet more traffic, while simultaneously increasing the cumulative annual price tag to keep the nation's highways in good repair. Congress should require that states focus available funding on our substantial repair backlog.

**3) Make short trips walkable by making them safe.** Wide, high-speed roads force people to drive for even very short local trips. When local streets—not just highways—are designed to move vehicles at the highest speed possible, it denies people the healthy and affordable option to bike or walk. The 2020 transportation reauthorization should include a policy that roads surrounded by development be designed for speeds of 35 mph or under to create safer conditions for walking and biking.

**4) Remove restrictions on pricing and allow DOTs to manage congestion.** Instead of treating congestion as a foregone conclusion and spending billions of dollars trying to mitigate it—focusing solely on increasing supply—we should be putting policies in place to help manage demand for driving.

**5) Reward infill development and make it easier for localities.** Developing on the fringes of urban areas results in a preventable “need” to expand roads to accommodate additional traffic. Yet we are essentially rewarding sprawl when we use limited transportation dollars to try to fix the congestion that results over the longer term. We should instead be orienting transportation funding to reward localities that seek more efficient ways of moving people—by bringing destinations closer together through land use decisions, managing driving demand, and making it easier to travel by other modes.

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